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### Sloane, Mark Twain as a Literary Comedian

Tom Brown

*University of Mississippi*

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David E. E. Sloane. *Mark Twain as a Literary Comedian*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State U. Press, 1979. 221pp. \$12.95.

Tradition may not answer all our questions, as Northrop Frye has argued, yet it does help explain the conditions under which an artist has labored. David Sloane thoroughly understands the traditions about which he writes, resulting in a study of Twain refreshing and illuminating.

Sloane states his thesis immediately — that Twain was less influenced by the old Southwestern humorists than by the literary comedians of the 1850's and 1860's. Writers such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson J. Hooper, George W. Harris, and Joseph G. Baldwin, Sloane claims, reflected the social mores of their respective locales, and their humor is essentially unsympathetic to the common man. The literary comedians of the Civil War era, on the other hand, — John Phoenix, B. P. Shillaber, Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, Orpheus C. Kerr — expressed the ethics of the rising middle class and championed a democratic social vision opposed to government and corporate power and traditional social mores. Twain's attitude throughout his career, Sloane argues, is clearly egalitarian, for his humor consistently asserts the positive values of the individual pitting himself against such corporate structures as government, big business, and organized religion.

Twain's use of literary comedy clashed with his interests as an ethicist, Sloane claims, as it did with other comedic writers of the period. Yet unlike other contemporary literary comedians, Twain eventually succeeded in combining literary comedy, realism, and local color in the novel form. Twain sought to achieve the appearance of realism in order to make more credible his social ethics but was not much interested in the actual mechanics of realistic fiction.

Sloane suggests that Twain's success in combining the tradition of literary comedy with the novel form resulted from his own writing career's diverging radically from that of other literary comedians. Twain fortuitously dropped out of the printing trade altogether between April 1857, and July 1861, while writers like Ward and Billings were most active in "refining and freezing the personae that became famous through early commentary on the Civil War." They

thus became locked into a particular personae, voice, and point of view, from which they could never successfully extricate themselves. Twain's slower development, assisted by his wide reading while a river-boat pilot, evolving through newspaper work and platform lecturing, allowed him greater range in acquiring the ironic stance that became characteristic of his work. Moreover, Twain, unlike Ward and Billings, resisted the temptation to achieve humor largely through cacography, a device that severely limits the range of the narrative voice. Finally, whereas Ward's immense popularity was based on his commentary of very contemporary events, Twain's popularity was based instead on the American egalitarian point of view of his various narrative voices.

Sloane's study begins with a thorough review of British and American literary comedians and their respective influences on Twain. It continues with a superb chapter on the work and contributions to the genre of Artemus Ward and proceeds to examine the social ethics of the literary comedians. The rest of the study traces Twain's development as a literary comedian and social critic in detailed analyses of *The Gilded Age*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *A Connecticut Yankee*, *The American Claimant*, and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

Exhaustively researched yet uncluttered and gracefully written, *Mark Twain as a Literary Comedian* is a major contribution to Twain scholarship. Because of its fundamental disagreement with certain established interpretations of Twain's work, it is likely to provoke controversy, but it is an approach to understanding the paradox of Mark Twain that cannot be ignored.

Tom Brown

The University of Mississippi